

National Security and the ‘Corbyn Effect’

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As a mark of respect, most political parties suspended national campaigning on Sunday 4 June, after the London Bridge terrorist attacks of Saturday 3 June. The 2017 general election campaign has now been interrupted twice by terrorism, the first incident being the 22 May bombing in Manchester.

The judgement to postpone national campaigning on Sunday was appropriate in the immediate aftermath of an attack, but it also highlighted the fact that national security issues have become central to political arguments during the final few weeks of the election campaign. This blog, the second of [ICSA’s security-themed election posts](#), assesses one of the election’s major issues, namely how voters should think about the likely national security impact of Jeremy Corbyn should he become prime minister on or after Friday 9 June.

When Theresa May was [24 points ahead in the polls](#) after she [called this general election](#), few of us could bring ourselves to think seriously about Jeremy Corbyn’s likely impact on UK foreign, defence and security policies if he were swept into office on Friday 9 June.

Even now, witnessing the setbacks to Theresa May’s campaign – the ‘Dementia Tax,’ leading from behind by sending Amber Rudd to the leadership debate, difficult questions about her record in government – and an associated [sharp reduction of her lead in the polls](#), it’s worth remembering that pollsters can make mistakes.

Nevertheless, with some polls now putting May’s lead within the margin of error, it seems like an appropriate time to ask the question: how would the ‘Corbyn Effect’ change UK national security policies and decision-making?

There are plenty of ways of trying to answer this question, some more nuanced than others, e.g. the *Telegraph*’s persistent series of stories [about Corbyn and Sinn Fein/PIRA](#).

In this post, I want to adopt a more balanced view by incorporating as much relevant context as possible, to show that the answer to this question is actually more complicated than it first appears.

Coalition and other constraints on Corbyn

First, a lot depends on the nature of a putative Corbyn Ascendancy: are we talking about a majority Labour administration, a minority government, or a coalition with Corbyn in the driver's seat? This matters, as the dynamics of a prime minister's support in parliament constrain the freedom of action to pursue preferred policies. Coalition might even strengthen a prime minister's hand *vis a vis* his or her own party – for example, did coalition with the Liberal Democrats enable David Cameron to delay calling a Brexit referendum for five years? But it is difficult to think of another foreign policy or security issue where the Liberal Democrats could be said to have had a similar impact. A lot depends on parliamentary arithmetic and the ability of a prime minister to deliver a parliamentary majority in support of his policy, [as Cameron found out in August 2013 when defeated in the House of Commons over military action in Syria](#).

Constraints are also imposed on leaders by opposition from *within their own* political parties. You can see evidence of this in Corbyn's approach to compromising with his parliamentary party by, for example, appointing a Shadow Defence Secretary, Nia Griffith, [whose personal views about the nuclear deterrent don't exactly seem identical with his own](#). That, and Labour's clear manifesto commitment to renewing Trident, would seem to close down one major national security issue associated with the Corbyn Effect: Trident renewal. Of course, if Corbyn succeeds in his mission to occupy No.10 then he would have emphatically neutralised the main criticism levelled against him by his fellow Labour MPs, namely that he cannot win elections. This might empower him to pick a Cabinet more closely aligned to his own views on defence, especially deterrence. Whether he could then secure the votes in Parliament to scrap the construction of the four new Dreadnought-class submarines that would carry the Trident missile is another story, even if he could rely on the votes of [staunly anti-Trident Scottish Nationalists](#).

Corbyn's credibility on nuclear deterrence

Another major nuclear issue that would be left open, however, is the credibility of Britain's nuclear deterrent under Corbyn: it is the prime minister's decision alone what [orders to issue to the Captains of the UK's nuclear-armed submarines](#), and deterrence effectively relies on adversaries believing that a prime minister might authorise a nuclear attack.

The credibility of the UK deterrent and the UK's commitment to collective defence within NATO are two major issues that fall squarely under the umbrella of the Corbyn Effect: how would adversaries and allies alike react to the election of a life-long peace-campaigner to make executive decisions about the UK's commitment to defend allies against aggression and, in the last resort, to use Britain's nuclear weapons? There is also the matter of Britain's position in arms treaty negotiations, such as the [Nuclear Ban Treaty](#) currently being advocated by many states at the UN. So far, the UK and other nuclear-armed states refuse to participate, dismissing the Ban Treaty as unrealistic. The UK's negotiating position regarding such initiatives could change overnight with Corbyn as PM, although this [wouldn't necessarily imply plain sailing for ratifying such a treaty](#).

It's also worth turning the common understanding of the Corbyn Effect on its head: the most heated and difficult questions faced by Corbyn in the [Question Time special on Friday 2 June](#) were about his willingness to mount a nuclear response to attacks, *e.g.* from North Korea and Iran. First, we need to be clear that ballistic missile attacks on the UK from [Iran](#) or [North Korea](#) really aren't highly probable events in the short or medium term (*i.e.* the entirety of the likely duration of a Corbyn premiership), given the limited respective, current capabilities and intentions of both those regimes. If voters think Iran or North Korea currently can, or would seriously want to, conduct a nuclear attack on the UK, then the government, experts and the media have done voters a disservice in failing to educate the public about the nature of the national security threat posed by nuclear proliferation and the development of ballistic missile capabilities.

There is, however, an adversary that already possesses sufficient nuclear weapons and the ballistic missile capability to attack the UK, namely Russia. Even Russia, of course, has little incentive to execute such an attack against the UK. And Russia would arguably have even less incentive to attack the UK should Corbyn enter No.10 after Thursday's election, assuming, as seems plausible, that Corbyn would be likely to pursue a less resolute line than Theresa May on sanctions against Russia or the Alliance's steps to enhance collective defence on its eastern flank.

Corbyn and collective defence

Russia may be unlikely to attack the UK, but Russian annexation of the Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine have raised fears amongst NATO allies that Putin may turn his attention to the Baltic states. What can we say about the Corbyn Effect on the credibility of British commitments to its NATO allies? Against the backdrop of a decade of increasingly-emboldened Russian information operations and military action, it is reasonable to assume that NATO allies would be concerned about the prospect of a watered-down British commitment to collective defence. But it's also reasonable to believe that the waves generated by Corbyn would be smaller than the waves already caused by President Trump's position on NATO.

Put differently, if Vladimir Putin has a secret plan to emulate his 2014 Crimea playbook and exploit an 'entirely spontaneous, in no way Moscow-directed' separatist movement [in an Estonian city like Narva](#), to what extent would Putin's decision-making calculus be affected by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the UK prime minister?

It's clear that Corbyn – [a former chair of the Stop the War coalition](#) – has a strong, deeply-engrained preference to try to talk away any and every conflict. As a humane impulse and basic starting point, this is entirely commendable. The relevant question for Corbyn as a prime minister is when and under what circumstances he would concede that measures beyond negotiation were necessary, up to and including the order to use military force. Does Corbyn see military action in defence of the UK's NATO allies in the same, sceptical way that he sees [elective wars in North Africa and the Middle East](#).

It is relatively easy to imagine Theresa May placing the UK at the forefront of the Alliance's efforts to secure a strong US response in the event of Russian hostilities on NATO's eastern flank. It is frankly harder to imagine Corbyn doing the same. Not *impossible* to imagine, especially given pressure from within his own party, but it would be a less confident forecast. Of course, there's a relevant, further question about whether such British and wider Alliance overtures would tip the balance in US decision-making, which would undoubtedly be the most consequential factor in Putin's mind.

Corbyn, Trump and the Special Relationship

This segues neatly to an equally important question: how exactly would Corbyn and Trump get on, and how much would such an 'odd couple' pairing actually matter for the health of the 'Special Relationship'? After all, prime ministers and presidents have not gelled personally in the past, and the bilateral relationship has survived. The imperatives driving US policy don't currently appear much affected by UK concerns, so it's difficult to imagine that Corbyn's likely more publicly-critical stance would have much more than a marginal impact on Trump's decisions, e.g. to cut US development assistance and the State Department's budget, or his intended withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Nor would a Corbyn administration's likely greater reluctance than May to consider escalating the UK military contribution in Syria, or anywhere else, be something that you could envisage weighing significantly in the balance when President Trump makes a decision about whether or not to order another missile strike or troop deployment: America First, after all.

Corbyn and domestic security

In a general election campaign blighted by two terrorist attacks, domestic security is an even more salient issue than it would otherwise have been. The Conservative attack line is that Corbyn is '[soft on terrorism](#)'. There is ample historical evidence of Corbyn's association with Irish Republican and Middle Eastern extremist groups, and Corbyn has previously [equivocated about 'shoot to kill' policies](#). He also has a consistent record of

voting against anti-terror legislation, though it should be added that a head-to-head comparison between Corbyn's and May's parliamentary voting records on counter terrorism since 2000 [demonstrates that May herself opposed some anti-terror measures before 2010](#).

Corbyn's major foreign policy speech of the election campaign, [delivered at Chatham House](#), made a cogent argument, echoing the [Iraq Inquiry testimony](#) of former Security Service boss Baroness Manningham-Buller, that elective foreign wars have been contributory causal factors increasing the terrorist threat to Britain and British citizens abroad. The Corbyn Effect would undoubtedly lead to a very different policy regarding Middle Eastern conflicts, including less British military intervention, more concerted and vocal diplomatic pressure against human rights abuses in Middle Eastern states.

We can legitimately debate the precise extent to which British involvement in military action in Iraq, Libya and Syria has been a contributory, causal factor that has motivated British jihadists to travel to war zones and/or perpetrate attacks in the UK. We cannot, however, ignore the significant increase in this domestic security threat in recent years. Corbyn's riposte to Conservative criticisms about *his* record on terrorism is to counter-punch on Theresa May's record on this very issue, although his punches had ([until today](#)) been more restrained than former David Cameron aide Steve Hilton, who [called for May to resign for failing to protect Britain from terrorist attacks](#).

It is important to emphasise that ministerial responsibility for counter terrorism, which May had as Home Secretary from 2010 to 2016, in no way makes her directly or uniquely responsible for failures to stem the flow of British jihadists to and from Iraq, Syria or Libya, any more than a successful terrorist attack or series of attacks implies a lack of professionalism by or insufficient investment in the police or security services. But the ability of law enforcement and domestic security services to meet this and other threats is a direct function of the government's investment in their respective capabilities, and of the overall strategic and policy direction that the government sets out. May can certainly be judged on this basis. In fact, the underlying premise of her 'strong and

stable' election slogan implies that May wants to be judged on her security-related credentials.

At a time of sharply rising threat from domestic terrorism, May's close personal association with existing counter-terrorism policies and reductions in the numbers of serving police officers, including authorised firearms officers ([albeit whilst ring-fencing the separate counter terrorism budget](#)), had until the last few weeks provoked fewer critical appraisals than might have been expected during the campaign.

Some experts [predict that the current jihadist threat to the UK could span another decade or more](#). In this context, how are we to quantify the possible impact of a Corbyn premiership on the UK's ongoing response? It is by no means clear that Corbyn's stated, alternative approach – addressing more rigorously the socio-economic conditions that contribute to radicalisation, significantly increasing police numbers, his [new-found commitment to police anti-terrorism powers](#), and his long-established criticism of the interventionist strand of British foreign policy – would lead to demonstrably worse outcomes for UK domestic security than we have seen since 2010. Assuming one take's Corbyn's campaign pledges at face value, May's security edge over him looks less obvious. This highlights the paramount importance of the question of Corbyn's *credibility*: Corbyn has made efforts to reassure voters on these issues, and the Labour party has produced a manifesto that does not offer 'unalloyed Corbynism' on defence and security issues, but what will voters make of these reassurances and this more balanced offer, especially when the Conservatives are pushing the line that Corbyn is not credible on these issues?

The machinery of government

Many column inches have been filled with stories about the close-knit circle of advisers surrounding Theresa May, and the fissures between Corbyn's inner circle and the wider parliamentary Labour party. In general, bunker mentalities make for poor decisions. A more deliberative, open approach doesn't guarantee better decisions, but it's much less

likely to fall foul of the pathologies that can afflict decisions made by small, insular groups.

Whoever wins the general election, it is possible that changes are in store for the Whitehall machinery supporting national security decision-making. For example, the [Conservative manifesto](#) waxed lyrical about the value of Britain's 'diplomatic service' but only mentioned the positive impact of the UK 'aid budget' – a possible sign that DfID may be subject to machinery of government reforms, possibly by re-absorption into the Foreign Office ([floated again recently in the pages of the *Spectator*](#)), which would turn the clock back to before May 1997.

Other changes may occur closer to the centre of government. In less than a year in office, [Theresa May had replaced the incumbent national security adviser with Mark Sedwill](#), an official with whom she had an established track-record of collaboration at the Home Office. Were Corbyn to become prime minister, it would be consistent with May's approach if he decided to seek a new NSA, one more aligned to his world-view. The important issue here is to ensure that concern for the personal relationship and 'fit' between a prime minister and NSA doesn't inhibit that NSA from providing strong, independent and challenging advice to the prime minister.

One criticism you hear about the current National Security Council apparatus is that it could do a better job of 'multiple advocacy,' that is to say, of presenting competing options to ministers, bringing heterodox advice into the picture, and that it could benefit from more of a 'challenge' function being built into the system. It would be good to see a fresh effort to explore these issues after the election, irrespective of who is prime minister. Corbyn may or may not plan to retain, reform or abolish the existing national security council (NSC) apparatus - if, indeed, he's really given the mechanics of government much thought up to this point. But it is easy to conceive of a significant challenge to policy orthodoxy coming from Corbyn himself, his No.10 team of advisers, and his NSC-attending ministers, *i.e.* Chancellor John McDonnell, Home Secretary Diane Abbott, International Development Secretary Kate Osamor, and Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry (assuming that Corbyn doesn't invite Alex Salmond or

Angus Robertson to occupy that role, in a [surprise Labour-SNP coalition](#)). For example, the Labour manifesto charts a very different course in some strategic diplomatic relationships, *e.g.* with Saudi Arabia.

Whether such changes would lead to better outcomes for UK national security depends on several factors, not least Whitehall's ability to adapt to and deliver on Corbyn's distinctly different agenda, as well as the extent to which 'Team Corbyn' could themselves adapt to the responsibilities of government, and the difficult task of ensuring that the governing machine is optimally configured to support their decision-making. This shouldn't mean immediately winnowing out existing officials, replacing those suspected of insufficient loyalty to the cause, but rather of being sufficiently confident and self-aware to recognise and address inevitable shortcomings and gaps in their new team's skill-set and experience. As with Tony Blair in May 1997 (about the only Blair-Corbyn parallel I can think of that actually holds), there is very limited experience of government, or of running other large organisations, in Corbyn's Leader's Office and Shadow Cabinet. Failure to use effectively the expertise and skills available in Whitehall and elsewhere is a major limiting factor for the potential success of any incoming administration.

Forecasting the Corbyn Effect

None of this should be taken as an indication that I think we will wake up on Friday 9 June to the bright dawn of a Corbyn premiership, or to the prospect of protracted days of coalition or minority government negotiations that ultimately lead to Theresa May's departure and Jeremy Corbyn entering No.10. But were Corbyn to achieve victory where Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband failed, it would make the 2017 general election one of the most storied in British political history.

General elections are essentially 'two-horse' races to become prime minister, and, please excuse the metaphor, the horse which had enjoyed a commanding, 'strong and stable' lead just a few weeks ago appears to have a weaker, much less stable lead today. Corbyn's victory would be a high impact, low probability event – a true [Black Swan](#). We know

enough nowadays not to place [undue weight on polling](#), but we'd also be remiss if we didn't begin to think seriously about the implications of a surprise Corbyn victory for all aspects of British government, not least national security. On reflection, those implications are more complicated than you might think. A less credible nuclear deterrent, yes; a less credible commitment to come to the aid of an ally on NATO's eastern flank, again, probably, but arguably a less consequential one than those allies' current perceptions of [the vacillation on this issue in the White House](#). These would be significant changes in the UK's national security posture and they should not be downplayed. What of foreign or domestic security policies that would expose the UK to a greater risk from terrorism? Here, the case against Corbyn rests on his career-long preference for dialogue with extremists and what now appears to be his [equivocation about a 'shoot to kill' policy](#).

But Jeremy Corbyn can hardly be blamed for the precipitous rise over recent years in the domestic threat posed by jihadists, even if the corollary, that Theresa May herself is directly culpable, is probably less plausible to most voters than it apparently is to Steve Hilton. Whoever emerges from Thursday's election as prime minister, the government will continue to face a significant terrorist threat. It will also continue to face decisions about whether and in what circumstances to use British military power abroad. Theresa May clearly banked on these issues being trump cards for her to play against Jeremy Corbyn during the campaign. In truth, however, this approach appears to have rebounded somewhat. Some voters will undoubtedly decide against Corbyn on the basis of his past associations and his stance on nuclear deterrence. But for other voters, Corbyn's views will chime with their sense of fatigued wariness about successive prime ministers' interventionist impulses.

As Andrew Bacevich has [put it in the US context](#), there is a growing perception that 'Killing people and bombing things has become a substitute for policy and indeed for thinking. Where there should be strategy, there is a void.' In the context of such scepticism about the wisdom of recent national security policies, policies with which Theresa May has so closely identified herself, a sufficient number of voters just might

decide to give Corbyn a whirl. The probability of that outcome may be low, but it is not zero. It should therefore have prompted more careful reflection during the campaign than has been the hallmark of debate about the ‘Corbyn Effect’ on national security.